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# **The Family Participation in Child Care Project**

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## **Introduction**

Working with families has long been a fundamental tenet of quality child care services. While there is broad agreement that family participation in child care offers multiple benefits to all concerned, many educators continue to identify this as one of the more challenging aspects of their work. There are a number of perceived barriers to participation, including time constraints, different needs and expectations and the lack of confidence and capacity to support genuine participation. What is interesting, and often overlooked, is that these are shared issues and relate to both educators and parents. Recognising the importance and challenge of family participation in child care, the Brisbane South Professional Support Network (PSN) is leading a collaborative research project to build educator knowledge and capacity to promote and support relationship building, meaningful dialogue and genuine partnerships in child care.

## **Current research and policy perspectives**

Drawing mostly on school-based research, there is evidence to indicate that working with families is beneficial to all concerned: children, parents, educators and the broader community. It is believed that working with families strengthens children's learning and wellbeing and that learning outcomes are more likely to be sustained over time (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). Parents have also reported benefits, including enhanced self esteem and capacity to support learning at home (DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, & Douchane, 2007). There is further evidence that genuine partnerships help educators to get to know children better, to understand parent hopes and expectations for their child, and to promote early learning and wellbeing, which can lead to greater job satisfaction. Recently, it has also been suggested that working with families builds parents' understanding and appreciation of the work of educators, and may thereby help to raise the professional status and value of child care within the broader community.

As is to be hoped, this research is informing current policy and standards in Australia. So, it is no surprise, that new initiatives such as the National Quality Standard (COAG, 2009), the *Early Years Learning Framework* and the *Framework for School Age Care* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009; 2011) include strengthened expectations for family participation in child care. An underpinning principle of the new *Education and Care Services National Law Act 2011* (Qld) is that the role of parents and families is to be respected and supported. One of the seven quality areas in the National Quality Standard is 'collaborative partnerships with families and communities', which places emphasis on services recognising families as experts, supporting families in their parenting role and providing families with information and opportunity to be involved in decision-making that affects their child (Council of Australian Governments, 2009). Both learning frameworks build on these expectations, promoting the need for welcoming and inclusive environments, effective communication, shared goals and shared decision-making.

## **The Family Participation in Child Care project**

To support services to meet and exceed these expectations, the Brisbane South PSN is leading the Family Participation in Child Care project, in collaboration with the Health and Community Workforce Council and QUT. The first phase of this study was conducted over a four month period, from July to October 2011. Eighteen child care services in the Brisbane South region responded to an Expression of Interest to support the study by sharing information with families and encouraging parents to share their views and experiences. Participating services reflected the full range of formal child care service types (i.e. child care centres, kindergartens, family day care, in home care and outside school hours care), and varied in size, the nature of the licensee (i.e. community-based, for-profit) and socio-economic location.

The primary method for data collection was a short anonymous online survey (via Survey Monkey), comprising a mix of multiple choice questions, rating scales and open-ended questions. Information about the nature and purpose of the study, ethical clearance and the link to the survey was emailed to families by their child care service. Responding to different family needs and preferences, a percentage of services supplemented this with printed information for families. The survey was open for three weeks, and continued to be actively promoted by participating child care services. A total of 196 surveys were completed by parents (175 online; 21 printed surveys).

The study elicited the views and experiences of a diverse group of families. The common factor was that all families had children in the age group birth to 12 years and were using formal child care services in the Brisbane South region. Within this context, the participant pool comprised two-parent, single-parent and extended families, and included families of Non-English Speaking Background, families with a child with a disability and an Aboriginal family. Of particular note, while using child care services in the Brisbane South region, family homes were spread across a very wide area (i.e. 85 distinct suburbs including some well outside the region), and spanned a range of socio-economic contexts.

### **Some key findings for reflection**

The study highlights differences in parent views, expectations and preferences, and the need for services to offer multiple ways for families to obtain and provide information and to participate in their service. Here is a snapshot of some of key findings.

To begin, families were asked why they used child care. The intent of this question was to start to build a picture of these families, and their capacity and motivation to participate in their child's service. As might be expected, supporting workforce participation was the dominant response, with almost 92% of parents identifying this as one of their top three reasons for using child care. However, offering some balance, the second most prevalent response was using child care to promote early learning followed by using child care to connect with other children and families. Adding to this picture, it was discovered that over one-third of participating parents were using two or more child care services. Parents explained their reasons for this, including catering for different aged children (e.g., before school and in school) and perceived benefit for the child (e.g., child care centre or family day care and kindergarten). In addition, many families identified school as yet another service they were using and trying to support. The context here is one of busy families, many of

whom are not only trying to balance work and family demands but are also making decisions about how they relate to multiple educators and services.

To provide an indication of the effectiveness of current strategies, parents were asked to rate their service(s) on information sharing, seeking information and supporting participation. The good news is that the majority of parents rated their service's efforts as either 'good' or 'very good'. However, there is always room for improvement and closer analysis provides a starting point for further reflection and review of practice. For example, collectively, services were rated most highly on sharing information (e.g. about the child's learning, about the service) and providing opportunity for parents to participate in the service. While the difference is slight, services did less well with respect to seeking parent information, in particular, feedback on the learning program. It is important to emphasise that this is a collective finding, and will be more or less applicable to services in the study. Nevertheless, it is a prompt to consider how well we are all meeting this expectation and ways that we might strengthen current practice.

Parents were asked what information they most liked to receive from their child care service. Not surprisingly, top of the list was information about their child's day, followed closely by information about their child's learning. While generally appreciative of current information provided, many parents sought more formal and detailed information about their child's learning and learning progress. This is interesting, and may relate to new early years initiatives and increased parent awareness of the importance of early learning. The following comments are representative of parent views and worthy of reflection.

*I want more information on what my child has done for the day. Not just the book on display giving generic information on the whole room, but specific and personal information...*

*I would like to know more about where my child is developmentally... in addition to chatting at drop off and pick up, a more formal update of her learning.*

*Anything that will help us to build on at home and vice versa.*

Informal approaches to information sharing were mostly preferred, in particular, chatting with educators at the beginning and end of the day. However, parents also identified a number of challenges to this, including parents rushing to work or home to cook dinner, busy educators and changing rosters and/or relief staff (i.e. the educator present doesn't know the child and/or is unable to report on the child's day). Interestingly, emailed notes and newsletters directed to home or work proved the next most popular approach to information sharing (69% of parents). While individual and group meetings were generally less popular, findings indicate that many parents still valued and expected regular opportunity to meet more formally with educators to talk about their child's learning and wellbeing (e.g. when their child commenced and then 1 – 2 times per semester).

With respect to participation, the majority of parents (78.8%) perceived that their service offered a range of opportunities to participate. However, this leaves just over one-fifth of the parents who perceived limited and/or tightly defined opportunity to participate (e.g., participation constructed as 'fund-raising', 'attending meetings' and/or 'attending special events'). There were also a small number of parents who felt uninformed about their options and/or that their participation was not really needed or valued by their service. While

reflecting only a small number of parent's views, the following comments are worthy of reflection.

- *A note is usually in the monthly newsletter asking if we have any skills to share but to be honest, the day is set out in advance by group leaders so for a parent to go in, they are just in the way.*
- *We are welcome to spend time there but end up not doing much.*

Interestingly, not all parents wanted to participate, with just over one-quarter of the parents indicating that they did not want to participate in their child's service. However, closed-answer questions can be misleading. Further analysis indicated that many of these parents were willing to participate in various ways, but felt unable to do this due to work and time pressures and/or how they or their service defined and delimited parent participation. Within this context, some parents perceived participation as being physically present and visible at the service.

The study was also interested in identifying what parents wanted from a partnership with their child care service. Once again, as is to be expected, there were differences in views and experiences, however, it was possible to identify some shared and overlapping themes. Collectively, parents characterised a productive partnership as *working together to provide a happy, safe and caring environment, to promote learning and development and the best outcomes for the child*. Parents wanted to have *trust and confidence* in their service, and to engage in *open and honest communication*. While some recognised partnership as *a shared responsibility*, the primary responsibility was seen to rest with educators and services, particularly with respect to *providing regular information and opportunity for parents to participate*. Finally, many saw partnership as working holistically with children and families and *responding to both child and family needs* and priorities. While not representing a shared view, these elements were seen to be important by many and connect with other perspectives on effective partnerships, for example, the *Early Years Learning Framework and Framework for School Age Care*.

## **Conclusion and next steps**

The study findings highlight diversity in parent views and expectations of information sharing, communication and participation in child care, and offer insights on ways that services may strengthen these important aspects of their work. The overarching message is that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to family participation; if we are seeking to support genuine partnerships and meaningful participation for all families, we need to identify and work with different family strengths, expectations and preferences. The concept of parent participation needs to be broadly defined, and not confined to time spent at the service. Finally, parents want the best outcomes for their children, and this is the primary motivation to work in partnership with child care services. But, this requires trust, two-way communication and leadership on the part of services. This article provides a snapshot of some key findings and these may be used to support professional conversations, collaborative reflection and new ways of working in child care services. While the first phase of this study is nearing completion, further analysis is being undertaken to look for differences that may be related to particular service types. In addition, the Brisbane South PSN is about to embark on a second phase of research, this time, looking at educator views and experiences of information

sharing, partnership and participation. When complete, this project will offer rich insights into this area of work, and practical ways that we can continue to enhance parent partnerships and family participation for the benefit of all stakeholders.

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